REVIEW

Globalization and Economic Participation by Arab Women

BY MARNIA LAZREG

A testimonial to changing times in the Arab world is the publication of the first report on Arab women's development issued by the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR). Managed by nine experts, five of whom are Arab women, this publication seeks to correct gender-blind research on the role and impact of globalization in the Arab world.

Reviewing available data for the 22 member-countries of the Arab League, the report depicts a grim picture of a region that has not actively redefined its role in the global economy while at the same time being negatively affected by it. Slow economic growth, decreasing exports and limited foreign direct investment outside of the energy sector translate into high rates of unemployment. For women (and youth), this has meant greater vulnerability. The need to work propels women into the labour market, but their entry is thwarted by the combined forces of structural adjustment, armed conflict and cultural constraints. Unemployment rates vary from a low of 5.4 percent in Yemen in 1994 to a high of 29.8 percent in Gaza in 1997. Erosion of women's employment is often the outcome of retrenchment in the public sector, a privileged source of female employment. However, like women in other (developing) regions, Arab women provide cheap labour for local male-operated cottage industry or export-processing zones, find the private sector discriminatory, explore self-employment with varying degrees of success and must cope with underemployment.

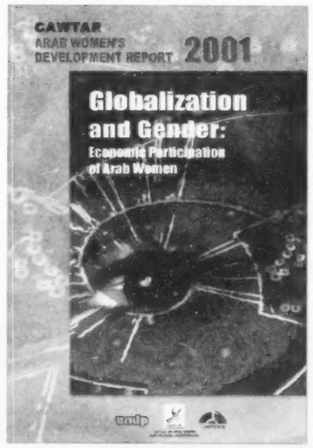
According to Soukeina Bouraoui, CAWTAR's executive director, the report is the first of a series that follows the format of the annual UNDP Human Development Report. She hopes the initial one will serve policymakers in the region as a catalyst for gender-sensitive debates on issues of critical importance to the Arab world.

This account of the impact of globalization is based on trend analysis. However, as the authors admit, the data is not always available, and where it is, it suffers from inconsistency, lacks comparability, and is not always broken out by gender. Consequently, extrapolations become problematic. This is not a minor point considering that the report makes recommendations about rethinking micro-credit on the basis of an "apparent trend" among poor women to take up home-based waged employment (page 19). The extreme diversity of political, economic and social systems in the region compounds the insufficiency of data, and militates against viewing the report as telling a single sad story.

The report relies on three selected measures of the impact of globalization: economic growth, export volume and direct financial investment. Inexplicably, no discussion or data on poverty is provided. Finally, the report evaluates globalization in terms of "winners" and "losers," a formulation that confounds the complexity of the relationship between local and international demands on states and citizens. Globalization is an uneven and unequal process that creates new opportunities, and deepens existing inequities. For women, some of these opportunities may be *qualitatively* significant, signaling cultural change. For example, in Algeria, women are entering occupations hitherto closed to them such as waitressing, sales, and real estate.

Raising these issues does not detract from the usefulness of the report. It is a welcome publication that helps to sustain interest in the Arab woman question and, hopefully, will spark national debates on how to meet the challenges of the global economy. ■

Marnia Lazreg is a professor of sociology in Women's Studies at Hunter College, New York City. She is a specialist in the sociology of developing societies, with a focus on the Middle East and North Africa.



Globalization and Gender: Economic Participation of Arab Women

Published by the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research, Tunis (2001)
245 pages, English
ISBN 9973-837-13-4

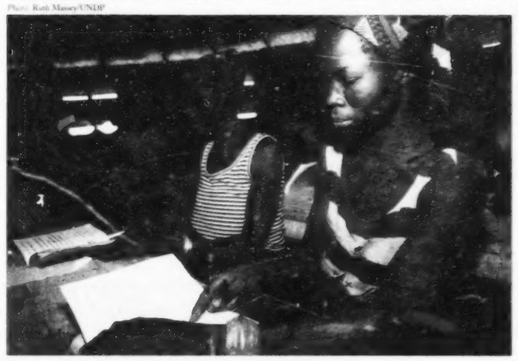
Mail order to: The Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research
44 rue de Pologne, 1005 El-Omrane, Tunis, Tunisia
Fax: 216 1 574 627
Telephone: 216 1 571 945 or 216 1 571 867

www.cawtar.org.tn

MATTERS OF FACT

♀ There is no country where women earn more than men. ♀ Two-thirds of the world's 876 million illiterates are women. ♀ By 2001, 168 countries—more than two-thirds of United Nations members—were party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the world's most comprehensive legal instrument outlining women's rights. ♀ In 1998, 8% of the world's cabinet ministers were women; Sweden was the only country with a majority of women ministers. ♀ A comprehensive study of 71 countries' news media found that only 17% of people interviewed, quoted or described in detail were women. ♀ In developing countries as a whole, 74% of girls and 76% of boys enrolled at Grade 1 reach Grade 5. ♀ 52% of girls and 59% of boys complete Grade 4 in the world's least developed nations. ♀ Women are 51% of the world's agricultural work force. ♀ In Southeast Asia women provide 90% of the labour for rice production. ♀ Women and children comprise 80% of the world's refugees and displaced people.

Photo: Ruth Massey/UNDP



Burkina Faso: Empowering women through education

Sources: UNDP Human Development Report 2001, UNFPA The State of World Population 2001, The World's Women—Trends and Statistics 2000.

undp Partnerships to Fight Poverty

United Nations Development Programme
One United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017

Stamps: United Nations For a Better World
NEW YORK NY MAR 1 8 02
PRIORITY 001508
UNITED NATIONS
UN POSTAGE
$1.26